

The History of Bull Baiting

Discover the myths, chaos and controversy that surrounded the greusome sport of bull baiting.

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Bull baiting, the long-practiced sport in which bully-type dogs were sent to attempt to bait and eventually bring down a tethered bull, evokes images of gruesome exhibitions staged for public amusement. As bull baiting grew in popularity, it led to the development of the Bulldog, which remains one of the most popular breeds. When bull baiting was banned, the resulting popularity of dog fighting led to the development of the pit bull terrier.

In his book, *British Dogs* (Collins, 1955), canine authority A. Croxton Smith writes, "That this brutal pastime gave pleasure to the spectators is obvious, but it is not certain that that was the primary object." If we delve beneath its shocking premise, bull baiting reveals quite a bit about our changing perceptions of dogs.

Bull baiting beginnings

In *The Book of the Dog* (Nicholson and Watson, 1948) author Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald states, "The remarkable thing is that bull baiting did not begin as a sport at all. It was once illegal to slaughter a bull unless it had first been baited with dogs." Historians agree that bull baiting evolved from the belief that prolonged exertion rendered tough meat tender and palatable. In 1655, English naturalist and physician Thomas Muffett explained, in the posthumously published book *Health's Improvement*, that "violent heat and motion might attenuate [the bulls'] blood, resolve their hardness, and make the flesh soften in digestion."

Bull baiting was codified into law in a Cambridge ordinance in 1376 forbidding the sale of meat from bulls that were not "baited," meaning they were fed with grass in a stall. This interpretation actually would have made some sense if the law was meant to guarantee quality meat for sale.

Smith theorized that the term "bull baiting," which originally referred to the practice of keeping bulls stabled and feeding them grass and hay, was later misinterpreted and an alternate definition became generally accepted. Bull baiting's popularity may have also derived from practical necessity. Tainted meat was a perpetual hazard. Therefore, it's understandable that potential consumers preferred to observe the town butcher slaughter an animal, which included baiting the bull, to ensure the meat's quality.

From practical use to sport

Centuries later, it's impossible to separate fact from legend, but there is no question that many people enjoyed watching bull baiting. In her book, *1700: Scenes from London Life* (Sceptre, 2001), Maureen Waller writes, "[Sixteenth century] Londoners had a taste for cruel and ferocious sport, which reflected their own lives: nasty, brutish and short." By 1500, bull baiting had progressed from a local food-safety ordinance to Britain's national pastime.

At first, any sturdy farm dog was considered suitable. This included ancestors of modern sheepdogs, mastiffs and bulldogs. The ancestors of the mastiff-type dogs, called *alauntes*, were said to be good for baiting bulls.

The *alaunt* descended from the molosser dogs of ancient Greece and Rome. In later centuries, they became classified as *canes rustici*, or *bandogges*. Larger specimens were used for guarding, boar hunting and bear baiting. Smaller dogs were used to drive and hold livestock. "Selection by man soon separated very widely the sheepdog or shepherd's mastiff and the mastiff that was specially bred for the bullring," writes James Watson in *The Dog Book* (Doubleday, Page and Company, 1906).

It's generally believed that bull baiting and bullfighting derived from medieval *par force* hunting techniques. *Alauntes* were trained to catch and hold wild boar by the ear. "From this mastiff group, the dog for the bull was developed and became the bulldog of England. There is no question that there was a similar dog in Spain as an assistant in bull fights, attacking and holding the bull by the ear, and this was the original method of attack in England," Watson writes.

How or why this southern-European boar-hunting technique developed into bull baiting remains a mystery. Even more puzzling were later revisions. "Only very large dogs could hold a bull by the ear, and those *alauntes* look more like our *Danes*," Watson writes. "It is generally understood that the dog had to pull the bull backward once around the ring in order to win ... When the latter mode of attack by the nose hold came into vogue is not susceptible to proof, but a description written in 1694 shows it was the custom at that period."

Watson theorized that some small, courageous dogs successfully pinned a bull by the nose, and this amazing feat came to be expected in bull baiting. Regardless of courage, few dogs had the strength and stamina to take down a bull or pull it around a ring. "The object in bull baiting was to grip the bull in a tender part of the face to hold him still or throw him. Tremendous power of jaw was necessary for this," Vesey-Fitzgerald writes.

Birth of the Bulldog

Bulldogs were first mentioned by name in 1631, referring to their function rather than a definitive breed. Although compact and powerful, the Bulldog that developed by 1800 was quite moderate in size compared to modern specimens. Even so, these physical modifications were considered extreme. "The Bulldog was used for the bull bait because he was exactly suited to the purpose," writes John Henry Walsh (under the pseudonym "Stonehenge") in his book *Dogs of the British Isles* (Herman Cox, 1867). "To permit his keeping his wind while holding on to the bull, the nostrils must be set back as far as possible behind the level of his teeth ... and hence the breeders have always insisted on the necessity of a shortness of the face to an extent such as never seen in any other variety of the species."

England's bullrings

Almost every town had a bullring, ranging from simple iron rings anchored into the ground to magnificent arenas. A game bull was essential for any important holiday or celebration, including wakes and weddings. "Men earned their livings by taking a game bull from one festivity to the next," Vesey-Fitzgerald writes.

Showmanship played a big role and professional bullots (owners/handlers of the bulls used for baiting) customarily decorated their bulls and marched them around town accompanied by musicians and criers. One of the most celebrated bullots, Jack Willets of Walsall, traveled to Spain to learn the fine points of bullfighting and subsequently wore a full matador's costume while parading his bull. At this point, bull baiting became a form of entertainment, and participating bulls were rented for baiting shows instead of being butchered and eaten.

Many bullrings still exist. The Birmingham Bullring, now a large shopping mall, was founded as a market in 1154. Two centuries later, it was a center of commerce and social activities. The bullring was situated at the hub of the market, and bull baiting was the highlight of every market day. Initially, butchers traded near bullrings, but as the sport's popularity grew, all vendors and craftsmen vied for space in this prime location.

The most celebrated British bullring was Paris Garden in Southwark, located a few paces from Shakespeare's Globe theatre. By the 17th century, bull baiting barely qualified as a blip on the radar in terms of Southwark's scandalous and criminal activities. During the 1400s, the aristocratic population of Southwark fled to escape waves of bubonic plague, abandoning their luxury homes. Paris Garden manor house was repurposed into a casino in 1530. Two baiting rings were erected behind it to accommodate 1,000 paying spectators. This was first-class entertainment of the Tudor era with shows every Thursday and Sunday. In 1591, stage plays were banned on Thursdays in Southwark, as well as in the rest of London, because they conflicted with baiting at Paris Garden.

Despite its popularity, many Londoners were offended by the sport, and considered it divine justice when eight spectators were killed after the stands collapsed during a Sunday performance on Jan. 13, 1583.

The grisly details

In venues large and small, a bull was tethered to a stake by a rope 15 yards long attached to his horns. Each dog's owner paid six pence to five shillings for a run at the bull. Bullots, dog owners and spectators placed wagers on particular dogs or the bull. When a dog was slipped, or released, it often lunged for the bull's head, which was usually disastrous. A game dog knew better. It stealthily crept as close as possible before springing from below. An inexperienced bull would lower his head, intending to gore the dog, but instead the move gave the dog a perfect opening to attack.

A wily bull remained on the defensive, leaving itself plenty of slack in the rope. At the opportune moment, the bull lowered his head, kept his legs close together to prevent the dog from darting between them, and charged. Rather than trying to gore the dog – which happened frequently – the bull attempted to slip a horn underneath the dog and toss it.

Owners were poised and ready to rescue their dogs by catching them or slipping a pole under the flying dog to break its fall and slide it to the ground. This provided almost as much entertainment as the main event, as revealed endlessly in art and literature of the era. This verse comes from an untitled 1830 poem authored by British poet and humorist Thomas Hood:

"A butcher once gave me a dog,
That turn'd out the worst one of any.
A Bull dog's own pup,

I got a toss up,
Before he had brought me a penny.”

A toss up was disappointing, but uninjured dogs were expected to try again. Not surprisingly, many tossed dogs proved unwilling to go back for seconds. Circumstances became substantially more dangerous if a bull was successfully pinned. The dog had to hang on as the bull stamped, lashed, rolled and bucked to shake it off. If the bull surrendered while it was pinned, the dog's jaws were pried apart, and at best, both combatants were relatively intact.

Frequently, the frantic bull snapped his rope and charged the crowd. “A roar would go up for ‘A lane, a lane’ and men would trample each other in their frenzy to avoid the danger into which they had so glibly urged their dogs,” Vesey-Fitzgerald writes. The element of surprise and jeopardy undoubtedly provided a lure equal to gambling and exhibitionism.

Diarist John Evelyn (1620 to 1706) of Surrey, England, memorialized his visit to Paris Garden on June 16, 1670: “I was forced to accompany some friends to the Bear Garden ... it being a famous day for all these butcherly sports or rather barbarous cruelties ... One of the bulls tossed a dog full into a lady's lap as she sat in one of the boxes at a considerable height from the arena ... I am most heartily weary of this rude and dirty pastime, which I had not seen I think in 20 years...” (Diary of John Evelyn, Bicker and Sons, 1879).

Waning popularity

By the 17th century, most bull baiting was relocated from town centers to suburbs, officially to improve public safety and convenience. But evidence reveals that its popularity was waning. It became increasingly difficult to procure bulls for baiting, and merchants became reluctant to promote these events. Legal effort to suppress the activity didn't begin until the 19th century.

However, private patronage was essential to the sport's accessibility as public entertainment and this funding may have dried up. In the 15th century, bull baiting was perceived as a means of keeping the lower classes content. Four centuries later, it was seen as a source of social unrest. Ironically, bull-baiting fans probably engineered its demise.

A year before the sport was prohibited, an article in the Derbyshire Courier described a bull baiting at Bonsall Wakes on Aug. 2, 1834, which, like many similar incidents, probably solidified public opinion against it: “The brutalizing spectacle of a bull bait was about being exhibited at this place on Monday last, and about thirty or forty blackguards with bulldogs, clubs, etc., were assembled to enjoy the sport, when the worthy clergyman finding remonstrance vain, actually purchased the poor animal's release from the brutes at the price of a guinea. In the evening, the same party demolished the windows, glasses, part of the furniture, etc. at several public-houses and at one time, there were four or five fights going on at once. So much for the innocent recreations of the working classes” (Ladies Kennel Journal, 1896).

Social disapproval curtailed bull baiting to some extent, but bills to prohibit it were defeated in 1800 and 1802. “It is almost inconceivable that attempts to prohibit bull baiting were resisted in the House of Commons on the plea that it fostered pluck among the masses and encouraged manly exercise,” Croxton Smith writes.

Effects on Bulldog breeding

An 1835 bill unexpectedly passed by a narrow margin, and Bulldog breeders suddenly found themselves with an enormous supply of dogs and zero demand. Although the Bulldog had a utilitarian design, by the 19th century, breeding had evolved into an art and the concept of ideal type became an equally imperative goal. “Soon after the enforced cessation of bull baiting, the breeding of bulldogs was in great measure stopped ... for want of encouragement, the pure breed became more and more rare ... the breed in London fell into the hands of publicans who held shows in their tap rooms to draw custom,” Walsh (Stonehenge) writes.

The demise of bull baiting became a major impetus for the creation of the modern dog show. Bulldog breeders began holding informal meetings and contests in the back rooms of pubs. These were the forerunners of modern dog shows, which made their debut two decades later. Although the Bulldog was perfected for an obsolete pastime, its enduring popularity far exceeded this role and the expectations of foundation breeders.

Today, bull baiting is, thankfully, a forgotten relic of the past. Although the breeds were created for an abhorrent pastime, the Bulldog and other bully breeds live among the the world's most beloved dogs.

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